



Sunday, August 30, 2009

New Sangre de Cristo heritage area celebrated; now work begins

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SAN LUIS - Supporters of the Sangre de Cristo National Heritage Area celebrated the success of their eight years of work Saturday.

The area's designation, passed by Congress in March and which took effect Saturday, makes the area eligible for up to \$10 million in matching funds over the next 15 years.

Now the heritage area's board of directors must form a management plan and start projects that interpret or preserve the history and culture of the area, which takes in Alamosa, Conejos and Costilla counties.

"Now we have to chart a new course," said Matthew Gallegos, who will lead the board. "That direction is something we have to determine."

The group's board, which plans to hold public meetings during the coming months to gather input, won't be short of material to work with.

Nestled into the three-county area is a long list of the state's historic firsts:

• San Luis is Colorado's oldest town;

• the state's oldest church sits in San Acacio and its oldest parish is in Conejos;

• Colorado's first surface water right was awarded to the People's Ditch, just outside San Luis; and

• the first right for a natural spring is in Conejos County.

Speakers at the board's celebration emphasized, however, that it was the stories of the people who've settled the valley that would undergird any projects.

Those stories could include the Hispanic settlers from northern New Mexico who found homes along Culebra Creek and the Conejos River and initiated all the firsts mentioned above.

They also might include in the history of Mormon settlement and the square grids they laid in communities like Manassa and Sanford, said Gallegos.

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The Environmental Impact Statement is anticipated to be completed in late 2010 and will be available at <http://www.usda.gov/rus/water/ees/ea.htm>.

<http://www.chieftain.com/articles/2009/08/30/news/local/doc4a9a085853e5c003320148.prt> 9/21/2009

And the list could go on to include the Japanese-Americans and Germans who settled there after the turn of the 20th century, or the rise of the railroads that helped Alamosa and Antonito to grow.

"All of those stories make up what we all care for so much," Gallegos said.

The heritage area also will honor the landscapes. Before Hispanic or Anglo settlers came to the valley, the Navajo regarded Blanca Peak as a holy site protected by the sand dunes just to the north of the 14,000-foot peak, said Art Hutchinson, superintendent of the Great Sand Dunes National Park.

"We wonder what the Clovis and the Folsom called this," Hutchinson added, referring to prehistoric peoples.

Ann Marie Velasquez, of Antonito, was honored for initiating the effort for the designation with a plaque and a standing ovation.

"I was very naive when I started down this path," she said, noting that she thought it would take three years at most.

Rep. John Salazar and then-Sen. Ken Salazar, both D-Colo., sponsored the bill.

John Salazar applauded the group for its hard work and told the story of how his family came to their family homestead just outside Manassa.

Ken Salazar, who now oversees all of the country's 49 heritage areas as Secretary of the Interior, was attending funeral services for Sen. Edward M. Kennedy.

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